

Cold, helpless, fragile as glass When I shatter, I will find you by janeelevenives83

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Summary: Mike and El Wheeler had never expected their life to be normal. One little stick at 4am on the bathroom floor changes that. But when old 'friends' come back to play, they leave with not only their ultimate goal, but a piece of Eleven that leaves a gnawing hole in her. And Mike won't stand for it...

1. Tiles

Mike sat up sleepily and his eyes drifted to the clock on his bedside table. It read 3:48am. Suddenly, he realised that something was missing. Sliding quietly out of bed, he padded around the apartment, looking. He started to panic when he couldn't find her anywhere, but then he heard muffled sounds coming from the bathroom, and a glow shining through the bottom of the door. He rushed in, and found El sitting on the floor, floods of happy tears running down her cheeks, holding a little stick that would change their life forever. "Mike," She said quietly "It's positive. I'm pregnant."

There had been lots of crying that night on the cold tiles of the bathroom floor (A feat that under any other circumstances wouldn't have been possible. They reminded her too much of the Lab). It really was a miracle. After everything with the government... the prospect of having a child had been marked, by the government themselves, as impossible. All the tests they conducted on her over the years had fried nearly all her reproductive cells. But here they were. Here was the evidence. She'd gotten through it. She'd survived. They were going to have a baby. Together.

2 weeks later, they pulled up outside the Wheelers'. It was Valentines day. They were planning on breaking the news to his mom, sister, Jonathan, Joyce and the Chief (as well as the boys, whom he had already taken the courtesy of inviting) today. Mike gently squeezed El's hand. "Ready?" he asked her. She smiled back at him, her eyes doe-like and surprisingly calm (though he knew about a thousand different feelings were probably going through her head). "Promise."

As they stepped through the front door, Mrs Wheeler rushed over to them and gave them both huge hugs, trying not to get flour on them from her apron. "Mike! El! It seems like forever since I last saw you!" She cried. El laughed and hugged her back, whilst Mike just rolled his eyes.

"Mom. You saw us less than two months ago. Remember Christmas?" Just then, Nancy came into the hall with little Anna by her side, who immediately rushed up to El.

"Aunty Ellie! Aunty Ellie!" She cried, dragging her into the living room as Karen went back to the kitchen. Nancy looked at her little (though he was now a full head taller than her) brother up and down, then smiled. "You don't look too bad, old man. I can't believe it. Mike Wheeler, my socially-awkward little brother, married and soon to be a father before any of his friends. Honestly, I thought it would've been Lucas or Dustin." He looked at her, confusion filling his face.

"What? How did you know? Did El tell you?" She just laughed at him and shook her head, enjoying his confused state.

"I think you've forgotten that I was pregnant 3 years ago. I know the signs Mike. So tell me. Who else knows?" He grinned mischievously now.

"No-one. But we're gonna tell mom and the guys and everyone later during dinner. Which reminds me." He shouted louder than necessary through to the kitchen. "Hey mom! Can you make 3 servings worth of extra food? The guys are coming over later for dinner!"

"Okay honey!" she shouted back. Laughing, the two siblings walked into the living room together, where an awe-struck Anna was looking in wonder in the mirror at the fancy hairdo she was now sporting thanks to El, who was engrossed in a conversation with her big brother. As Mike looked around the room, he knew they'd made a good decision deciding to tell everyone together. He couldn't be prouder of the family his child was going to grow up around.

2. Abuse

Mike looked around the table at the content faces eating dinner. His mom sat at the head, with Joyce and Hopper on one side and Nancy (who was feeding Anna) and Jonathan on the other. Then it was Will and his boyfriend Kyle (he had just recently come out when he arrived. There'd been lots of hugging and Karen had rushed into the kitchen to make some more food) who sat opposite Dustin and Lucas. And finally, El, squished next to Lucas. She kept catching his eye through the meal, smiling at him. He could tell she was nervous, so he reached out under the table and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. The people around him now... they were (mostly) the people he'd grown up with. The people who'd been there through tough times. The people his child was going to grow up with as family. He was happy.

When everyone had finished their meal and thanked Mrs Wheeler for it, Mike nervously stood up before his mom could take away the dishes. Nancy smiled at him encouragingly, and he took a deep breath. "Um, guys, I just want to say something." All eyes were on him now. He gulped. "First off, I just want to thank everyone for coming. I've known you guys forever. Well, not Kyle," he nodded in the other man's direction "but the rest of you, I have. You've all been like family to me, and I wanna thank you all. Without your help... we might not all be here today. So yeah, thanks. I-We have something to announce." He reached towards El's open palm and held it there, their fingers intertwined. "We... We're going to have a baby."

For a while, everyone (apart from Nancy, who just smirked around the table) just sat in silence, taking in the information they had just been confronted with. Then Dustin stood up, hugged El, and gave Mike a pat on the back. "Congratulations, man!" He was quickly followed by Lucas, Will, Nancy, Jonathan, Joyce, and his mom. Finally, there was just Hopper left. For a moment, Mike shrunk back, feeling like he had all those years ago when Hopper had caught them kissing in the basement (which was *petrified*, though that would be a major understatement). However, his fears quickly vanished as the still-Chief walked over and shook his hand, tears threatening to form. He let out a breath that he had been unaware he was holding.

Everything was good. Everything was okay. He was going to be a dad.

As everyone was chattering to one another, Karen went up to her son and gave him a hug. "I'm so proud of you honey. You're going to be a great dad. Your father, he would've been proud of you." Suddenly, all the emotion in his face fell away and he looked to the floor. His mom noticed. "Oh honey. Give your father a break. He really loved you." Mike looked her dead in the eye. "Oh yeah? The bruises on my face sure showed that, didn't they? Don't you remember? I couldn't go to school for two weeks. He kept on hitting me, and the only person in this house who seemed to care was Nancy. God, even *Holly* noticed. But you? You just stood back and let him." She smiled at him softly, trying her best to calm the situation.

"He thought you were *queer*, Mike. You have to understand that. And he was troubled during that time period. Work was stressful for him. You have to understand." Mike just glared at her. "You disgust me." He snarled finally, walking away from her and going outside. From across the room, Nancy saw him walking away and shot her mother a look that could kill before nudging El. "Hey um, I think you should go check on Mike. He seems pretty... upset." Nodding, the young woman slipped outside to him.

"Hey." El said, bending down to join him as he sat against the powerlines that ran behind his house. "What's up?" Mike sighed. He had never told El when he was younger the true reason he'd had the nasty bruises across his face. He hadn't wanted to worry her. Which also meant she had no idea why he resented his deceased father so much. "It's... nothing. It's nothing. I'm okay."

"Mike." She said softly. He looked at her, and her worry-filled eyes threatened to melt his heart. "Friends don't lie. What's wrong?" He laughed a little at their old saying, then sighed. It was obvious she wasn't going to give in. "It's just... my mom said something about my dad." He watched out the corner of his eye her face grew confused. "Do you remember when I was 15 or 16, and I had those bruises all over my face? I told you and the guys that I'd fallen off my bike, right? Well, I didn't tell you the real reason... it was him. My dad. He hit me. He thought I was queer, and shouted at me that he didn't raise a son to be gay. And he hit me. A lot." He saw her face twist in

shock, but carried on. "And then I get mom telling me to 'forgive' him and pay him some respect. But I already did that. I went to his funeral. That's more respect than he deserved." She gently gripped his arm and rested her head softly on his shoulder. "Mike. I understand. I- I didn't know. I'm sorry." Mike carefully stroked her head. "No. No. It's not your fault. You couldn't have known. But I can't handle her talking about him like he was a good person. Like it wasn't his fault." They both look each other in the eye. "At least we have each other." She smiled and let out a laugh, patting her tummy. "And... Benny?" He smiled back at her. He knew what had happened the morning before they had found her, and knew that she felt guilty. This was her small way of making sure he was remembered. "Yeah. Benny. That's great."

Nancy and Mike both sat on the sofa, observing the scene. El, Lucas, Dustin, Will and a confused looking Kyle were all sat together, catching up on their years apart, and rehashing the events of '83 (though they kept some things excluded, for the newcomer knew nothing of the Demogorgon, the upside down or Eleven's powers). Jonathan and Hopper sat with Anna, hilariously trying to keep her entertained, and Joyce and Karen sat chatting away about baby nonsense and normal, *un-monster related* things. After a while of sitting in peaceful silence, Mike spoke to her. "Why'd you come back?"

"What?" she said in confusion, turning in her seat to face him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean why did you come back? To Hawkins? You and Jonathan... and Steve, you were all monster hunting." She shushed him, but let him go on. "You lived in Chicago. You'd escaped this place. You were free. Everything that'd happened, you'd escaped it. But then you get pregnant, and all of a sudden you're back in Hawkins. For good. All those bad memories, they are all here. And you just came to live with them." She sat in silence for a moment, contemplating his outburst. Then she spoke. "Tell me honestly, Mike. Did *you* ever really escape? Did the memories disappear from your mind? Did the nightmares ever go away for El? Or you? Were you ever really free? Because I sure as hell wasn't. They stuck with me, wherever I went. And sure, the pain became easier to handle. The nightmares became less frequent. But they were still there. One thing we all learnt that week

was that you can't outrun the monster. The memories are the monster. If you can't outrun it, you face it. You destroy it. But that comes at the cost of destroying yourself. So I learned to live with the monster. But life was also a monster too. I stopped monster hunting... because of Steve. He didn't deserve that. He shouldn't have ever been there. But he was. And now he's gone. If I carried on, I'd be putting Jonathan at risk too. Plus, we had a *child* on the way. That was the most important thing. So we came back, not caring about this monster. I didn't care about the pain, Mike, because honestly? The pain was the thing that kept everything real." For a while, they both said nothing, Mike trying to register everything his sister had just said, and Nancy trying to figure out where that had all come from. Then Mike held her hand tightly, and looked at her. "I'm really sorry about Steve, sis. Wherever he's gone, you and Jonathan will get him back. I can look after Anna for you, if you ever feel the need to get out of this tiny town. Just call me, okay?" She laughed, wondering when he'd decided to become the big brother. "Thanks." It was quiet, but it was genuine, and Mike could tell. "Thanks."

3. Powers

Mike awoke to the sound of muffled snuffles. It was 0:18am, and El was turned away from him, trying to mute her crying into her pillow. "El?" He said gently, placing a hand on her arm as she turned to face him, her brown eyes red and puffy from tears. "What's wrong?" She attempted to mask her obvious sadness with a small smile, but he saw right through it. He hadn't known (and loved) this girl for 12 years without learning how to read her emotions. "What's wrong, El? You know you can tell me anything, right?"

"It's just..." she began, trying to figure out the right words to use, the right way to say it. He waited patiently, knowing she'd tell him in her own time. "It's just... what if, our baby..." her eyes welled up with tears, and Mike felt like he was 12 years old again, watching her go through pain but not knowing how to help her, how to ease away her troubles, how to keep her safe. "What if he's like me?" With that she broke down again, clutching him to her, as if she was afraid he'd otherwise disappear. It took him a few seconds to realise what she was talking about, and when he did he just felt so damn useless. "Hey," he said softly, cupping her tear streaked face in his hands "it's going to be okay, okay? It doesn't matter whether or not he's like you. In fact, I really hope he is. Because you, you're the greatest, kindest, sweetest person I know. He'd be so fucking lucky to be like you, okay? Don't do this to yourself." She sniffled, furrowing her eyebrows.

"Bu- but, what if he has m- my powers?" She stuttered. "How are we gonna look after him without putting you danger?" He'll only be a baby. He might not be able to control them. And what about school? How are we gonna keep him from revealing his powers in front of the other kids? Or the teachers, Mike. The kids, that could be fine. But the teachers? They're more likely to be believed. Oh yeah, there's someone else too." Taking a shaky breath, El closed her eyes and spoke quietly, fear and terror overpowering her voice. "Bad men." All of a sudden, anger welled inside Mike's chest. 12 years later, and Brenner, the Bad Man, the man El was once manipulated into believing was her 'Papa', was still managing to haunt and terror her life. The bastard was dead, and yet he still managed to worm his way into their lives and fuck everything up. Mike wrapped his arms round

her protectively and buried his face into the crook of her neck, whispering encouraging, reassuring words to her as she continued to sob into his t shirt.

It's okay.

I'm right here.

He'll be okay.

The Bad Men are gone now.

They can't hurt you anymore.

I love you so much.

Eventually, her crying subsided, but they kept in that position, both wishing for the moment to never end. When it did, El looked her deep, doe-like eyes, eyes that'd seen so many terrible things as a child, into Mike's and chewed her bottom lip, grinning slightly. "Promise?" Mike smiled at their sacred word, which had caused them so much grief and yet so much happiness, and placed a small, sweet kiss on her lips, much like their first that night in the cafeteria. "Promise."

4. Don't Scream

"Hello, Blockbuster Chicago, Da- oh. What's that? Mike?" Said boy perked up as he heard his name in the muffled phone call coming from the front of the shop. Danielle peeked her head through to the store cupboard, throwing him the receiver. "Sounds urgent."

"Hello? Who is this?" Mike said suspiciously. Last time he'd gotten an 'urgent' call during work, it'd been Dustin pranking him. Just because he was technically an adult, he hadn't grown up that much really. "Mike? Oh shit oh shit man!" Again, it was Dustin, but this time he sounded sincerely worried. "Why was your phone turned off? You know what, doesn't matter. Just get to the hospital. El's in labour. The doctors said the kid should be here in the next few hours. And you know you need to be there. If she screams, the whole hospital's gonna come tumbling down. Hello? Mike? You still there?" Mike was in fact not there, but rushing out the shop, having forgotten to hang up the call. There had been too much to think about. Including the fact that soon, he'd be a father.

Bursting through the doors, Mike was met by Dustin, who hurriedly dragged him through multiple corridors to the maternity unit, and El's room. She was lying on the bed, face pale from pain, but thankfully not screaming. Yet. "Hey," she said, maintaining a small smile "What took you so long?" Mike grinned. "You okay?" He asked. She just nodded her head slightly. "Promise."

Doctors rushed round the small room. Joyce placed a hand on El's shoulder to calm her, but she was sure she didn't need to. Mike was knelt by her side, squeezing her hand, whispering to her. Mike Wheeler, the love of her little girl's life. The boy who had, all those years ago, pulled her out of the rain and given her things she'd been deprived of her whole life. Shelter, safety, friendship, hope. Love. He was the reason she was here now. He had never stopped believing in her when she was gone. He was the only one who really believed it. Sure, Hopper had knew, but that was because he was provided with hard evidence. Mike'd only had a feeling. He had risked his life for her. And for that, Joyce would be forever grateful.

"Okay, Mrs Wheeler, I'm going to need you to take deep breaths." The

nurse said. She was trying to keep El calm and get her ready, but there was really no need. After everything that'd happened to her in her life, she knew just how to handle this. But still, she was glad to have Mike there by her side. "Okay. Now, on the count of 3, push as hard as you can."

"Two, actually." Mike whispered into her ear. "You can't scream, okay?" He tried to smile, but tears were falling down his face. It hurt him to see her in so much pain. And she couldn't even let it out without possibly killing everyone in the room. "Ready?" The nurse asked. "Ready." El said softly.

"Okay. One,"

"You're so brave."

"Two,"

"Don't scream. I love you."

"Three!"

Ten minutes later, El was holding a tiny bundle in her arms as geologists and scientists on the news discussed a mysterious earthquake that'd just shook Chicago. "He has your freckles." She said to Mike, looking at the tiny constellations in Benny's sleeping face. Mike smiled. "And your eyes." It was true. The deep brown colour had already been in his eyes, and their shape was soft and doe like, just like El's. "Hey, get some rest, okay? I'll be back in an hour." He placed a small kiss on her head and exited the room, though not before looking back at his - their - son. He suddenly realised that it was November 13th; the day that before had meant loss and pain, but would now mean family and happiness. And in that moment, it seemed like nothing could get in the way of their happiness.

About half an hour before Mike was due to be back, a nurse came into the room. "Ma'am, I need to take Benjamin here to get weighed and have his vitals checked out and what not." She said, holding out her arms. El was hesitant; she never, ever wanted to let go of her precious baby. But she knew it was normal procedure. She lifted Benny into the women's arms, and the women smiled sweetly. Too

sweetly. "Now, I recommend you get some rest. Benjamin here will be back when you wake up. I swear he'll be in very good hands." El nodded and closed her eyes as the woman left the room. She soon fell into a peaceful sleep, completely oblivious to the fact that the woman was handing her baby boy over to a man in a suit. Completely oblivious to the fact that the man was putting him into a black car and driving away, farther and farther by the minute. Completely oblivious to the fact that history was repeating itself.

5. O' Heavenly Father

"Hey," Mike whispered as he entered the room, waking up a sleeping El "have a nice sleep?" El opened her eyes slowly and nodded her head. "Yeah." In truth, Mike had only been out of the room for 35 minutes. He couldn't bear to be away from El and his son for any longer. Speaking of... "Where's Benny?" She smiled softly. "The nurse took him for his check up." Nodding his head, Mike gently lay down beside her as she snuggled her nose into his chest. It finally seemed as if they'd escaped their past. It finally seemed as if it was all over. It finally seemed as if they had won.

Minutes later, a young nurse came into the room. "Hi, my names Cindy. I'm here to take Benjamin for his check up?"

"Another nurse has already taken him." El explained, her lids fighting to close. Cindy's eyebrows furrowed, but she managed to maintain a smile. "Oh? What was her name?" El thought back. The nurse hadn't given her name, but she had been wearing a badge... "Carol? Yeah, Carol. Carol Jenkins." Now the young woman's face turned to a confused frown. "But... There are no Carol's in maternity. And no Carol Jenkins in the entire hospital." Suddenly, all the colour fell from Mike's skin, and he turned a deathly pale as El began hyperventilating. "El? El? Are you okay? Are you sure that was her name?" El gripped the edge of her bed, her knuckles turning white, before letting out a heart wrenching cry.

The lights eventually stopped flickering as people panicked after yet another earthquake, though geologists said that it was a 3.4, a huge rise from the previous 2.8. Still, nobody of any authority knew what had caused them. "What do you mean don't panic? I don't give a fuck about these earthquakes! Where the hell is our son?" Mike was shouting at a doctor, who tried (and failed) to calm the situation. Joyce held a shaking El as Hopper checked out the security tapes, trying not to break down. About 5 minutes later, he came back into the room, shooing away the doctors and nurses. "We have a woman matching the description El gave us on tape." He said, his face pale and his leg shaking worriedly despite the strong front he attempted to put up. "She has a baby in her hands... But you're not gonna like who

she gives him to." El's face hardened and she glared at him. "Show me the bastard."

In the security room, Hopper began to play the footage as Mike and Joyce stood behind El. The older woman walked through the corridors, Benny barely hidden beneath her large coat. And then... Mike's heart stopped as El paused the video and pointed to the screen, her voice choked up and sounding like the scared 12 year old girl she had once been. "Papa."

6. Nothing More Than A Number

In the month after Brenner took El's baby, nobody made much progress in the investigation. He wasn't anywhere in the CIA's database. It was as if he'd disappeared that day in 1983 and been popped back onto the earth 12 years later. As for his getaway vehicle, they were having even less luck. Every security camera on the street had been disconnected, and most of the hospital's too. He had left that camera on purpose. He wanted them to know. He wanted to make El realise that she could never escape her past without sacrificing the wellbeing of others. And it had worked.

Only a week after, she had gone back to her job at the Chicago Newspaper, and begged her boss to let her investigate MKUltra. He allowed her to, saying it'd be "a great story for the paper" and that he wanted "something no one else had dug up on them" before. She promised him she could, telling him she already knew some dirt on them. So she and Mike moved back to Hawkins and bought a house together, their first house, on the same street as Nancy and Jonathan. In all honesty, Mike had been planning on moving back anyway, even if she didn't get permission for the job. They both needed to be around family.

Around people, El was strong. She put a brave smile on her face and said that Brenner wouldn't be able to get away with this again. Around her family, she constantly flipped through old news articles and phoned people who'd been involved in the experiments (she even managed to connect with one of the scientists who'd been there for half her life. The man had started crying when he realised who it was, saying that he was so sorry over and over. That he had wanted to stop, but they would've killed him). She dug up lots of dirt on the program and Brenner, but only up to 1971, the year she'd been born. After that, the line went silent. It was only when she was alone, or with just Mike, that she showed her true feelings. She'd have nightmares of the labs constantly, something that hadn't happened since she was 15. Mike would try to wake her up, but she begged him not to, for fear of her using her powers and hurting him. She cried bitterly each night, weeping for her child, weeping for the permanent reminder of her past inked onto her arm. Weeping for what the bad

men would do to her baby boy. They'd take away his name, strip away his identity, and make him nothing more than a number. 012.

Hopper was still in contact with the government men from those years ago, and consistently grilled them for information on his granddaughter's whereabouts. Apparently, no one knew. He presumed that, if they were telling the truth, Brenner had assembled a new team of men, or made this his personal project with a few of his most loyal people. But it didn't really make a difference, since there was no trace of him anywhere. His last registered home was a little apartment in New York. 34 years ago. It was as if for the rest of his life, he just lived in the Lab. It wouldn't surprise him.

El's hope was dwindling away, and it affected her so much. Her sentences became shorter, and less complex, like how she'd talked when the boys first found her in the woods. It pained Mike to see her like that, slowly turning into back into the frightened, quiet twelve year old girl he'd wanted to protect and at the same time been terrified of. Even now, 12 years later, he felt the urge to keep her safe, though he knew there was nothing he could do. In the first month after their baby was taken, Brenner was always two steps ahead, always with the upper hand. And that was how it was for a long, long time.

7. I Want You To Kill It

AN: Two chapters because they are loooong overdue. The previous chapter has been uploaded on AO3 for about a week now, and *this* chapter would've been up on Saturday but I accidentally kinda deleted it from my notes and had to rewrite the whole thing again oops :(

A year used to seem like a long time. A lot could change in a year. 'Could' being the key word. Because not a lot changed in the first year. Nothing new was uncovered, and Brenner remained a steady 5 steps ahead of them. Nothing changed in the investigation. But El did. And not for the better.

She quit her job with the paper, claiming that it was holding her back and staying there was just wasting time finding her son. She and Mike moved back to Hawkins so she could dig up some dirt almost straight from the source. In truth, Mike had been planning on moving them back here whether she quit her job or not. They needed to be around family.

Little things about her changed, too. Things so small that no one noticed. Except Mike. Like how she stopped eating eggos. ("I don't want any eggos, Mike." She had sighed exasperatedly in the grocery store, walking away from the shocked man and the freezer aisle). Everyone else brushed it aside, saying that she probably just got sick of them. ("And thank god too!" Dustin had laughed. "Dude, you've been feeding her eggos for 13 years! Chill!"). But Mike knew it was more than that. Because, for starters, they never bought a single eggo again. However pretty soon, the others noticed. They noticed how she crawled back into herself. And how she rarely smiled. And how she would circle the lab every night, looking for a way in, no matter how much Mike'd beg her not to.

"Eleven." Papa's cool voice bounces from the tile walls. It's the only sound there is, except for the faint humming of machines and the occasional hitch of breath from herself, so she focuses on it. "We're going to try something new today." Two men in white uniform carry in a large cage covered in a canvas cloth. Never once do they take their eyes away from her. Never once do their hands stop trembling.

They're afraid of her. Good. They place it on the table, and Eleven finds the echoing cling of metal meeting metal oddly soothing. Papa takes a step closer to her, and the men quickly remove the cover. Inside is Benny, screaming and bawling. Her breath hitches, and she begins shaking her head as fat tears roll down her cheeks, already knowing what his request – no, order would be. "Eleven," his words are sharp, and she swears the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. "I want you to kill it."

El sat up in a cold sweat, tears leaking out of her eyes and running down her cheeks. It took her a moment to realise that, no, she wasn't back in the lab, Papa forcing her to do things she didn't like and threatening her every move, but in her own bed, 13 years later, next to the man she loved. "El? El?" Mike was propped up on his elbow, worry clearly etched across his face. "...Mike." It was only one syllable, but the word managed to flood colour back into his face as he relaxed and loosened his tense shoulders. "Are you okay?" And then she was sobbing, clutching his t-shirt for dear life and batting her hands against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her, feeling utterly helpless. "El? El? What's wrong? What's wrong?" She felt like she was suffocating, but she managed to get out a few shaky words between her sobs. "Benny... gone... it's all... my fault... it's... my... FAULT!" Softly cupping her face in his hand, Mike looked her firmly in the eye. "No. Listen to me, okay? This is not your fault. None of it is."

"But... but... if I didn't have p-powers... he wouldn't... and Papa wouldn't... have taken him." She missed how he winced at 'Papa', how he was terrified she was turning back into the scared, abused 12 year old he'd found in the woods. She missed the helplessness in his eyes as he was forced to watch from the sidelines, how he couldn't help her find her way. She missed the few tears dripping down his cheeks that were quickly wiped away, out of sight. "Hey, hey. The only person to blame here is Brenner. He tortured and abused you for half your life. He took Benny away. But he won't get away with it, you hear me? I know because you're strong. You're the strongest person I know. You'll find him. You'll get through this." She sniffled and shook her head a little, looking Mike in the eye. "No. We. I can't do this without you."

"You don't have to."

8. Blackouts

AN: As a couple of you kindly pointed out, chapter 8 was uploaded in the wrong format (FFN did something weird to it). Sorry about that! Anyway, here it is now, in the *right* format. Hope you all like this!

As his consciousness left the never-ending darkness and his eyes looked around the hazy room, Mike thought back to the last thing he could remember. All those years ago, in the four months El had been missing, he had blacked out every now and again, waking up in the middle of the woods or sometimes the very edge of the cliff. He had taught himself to immediately recall the past events. That was how he coped. That was why he never confided in Nancy or his friends.

Thinking back, Mike remembered. They (himself, El, Nancy, Jonathan, Hopper, Will, Lucas and Dustin) had been fighting a monster. Another Thessaly. He remembered El killing it. He remembered looking in awe as the girl he knew came flooding back. He remembered her shouting to him as a sharp jab entered his neck and he entered the darkness. That's it. His eyes adjusted to the stark light, and he felt more memories rushing to him as he looks around the room. Memories of 14 years ago, searching through the lab with Will by his side as his compass. His heartbeat quickened, his fists clenched, and he finally registered the lone figure standing in the corner. "Brenner."

"Michael Wheeler." His crisp, neutral voice echoed from the walls and sent shivers down Mike's back. Not that he'd let him know that.

"What do you want?" He spat, anger flashing in his eyes that sent chills across Brenner's arms. Not that he'd let him know that. "It's very simple, really. We want you to stop looking for Project 012." Mike launched his body at the older man, only to be restrained by the chair. "Don't you dare call him that. He's my son. He isn't some science experiment." Brenner rolled his eyes and shook his head, sighing. "Nevertheless, it's in your best interest that you stop. You've been looking for 3 years. Do you really think this will make a difference?" For a moment, Mike was silent. Then, he gave him a sly smile. "Clearly it is, since we're so close that you have to ask us to

stop. But we won't. I'm never going to stop looking for my son until the day I die. And neither will El." Sighing, Brenner signalled at the one-way window, and two men came into the room. "What, are you gonna kill me now? But I was so enjoying our conversation."

"Unfortunately for me, I cannot do that. Killing you would endanger both my life and the lives of my men, and that is a risk I'm not willing to take." Mike smiled then, knowing that no matter what a tough front Brenner was putting up, deep down he was scared. Good. "But I must warn you, Mr Wheeler, that although we cannot kill you, there are others you hold dearly who we can hurt. Just remember that." With that, another jab entered Mike's neck, and he once again fell into the darkness.

The next time Mike woke up, he was in the middle of the woods. The sun was beginning to set, and he wouldn't have known where he was if not for the flag sticking in the ground, weighed down by rain. The fort itself had been knocked down almost immediately after Will came back from the Upside Down, but he had wanted to keep something there. A reminder that it was a thing of the past. That he had survived. That it couldn't hurt him anymore. Now, it was the only reason Mike managed to find his way out of Mirkwood and to the Hopper household, where he saw 3 cars parked outside. He stumbled toward the back door, shivering and cold, and burst inside, collapsing onto the kitchen floor as Nancy and El rushed in. "Oh my god Mike!" El sobbed, dropping down to her knees and hugging him close, sobbing into to him. "I was so worried where have you been oh god I love you I love you so much!"

Once they had him warmed up and had his story, Hopper produced a tape with a note stuck to it. "This was in your pocket..." He said, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "It says 'Just in case you didn't believe me'. Do you know what it is?" Mike's hands clenched. "No idea. Play it."

"Soooo... anyone there? Hello? Come on, I know someone's there. Where am I?" The young man's face is scratched, bloody, and in need of attention. His hair is matted down with sweat. Suddenly, a man with stark white hair enters the room and lurks in the shadows like some sort of beast. Quite an accurate description, considering what he has done and is yet to do. "Steven Harrington." His voice is crisp and cut across the air like

ice. "Well finally. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about me." Steve's tone radiates bravery, but deep down his gut is twisting in fear. Unfortunately, Brenner can see that. "I'm going to make this quick." He says, sitting on the chair across from him. "We want your help. We want you to convince Project 011 to come back to us." Steve arcs a brow and tilts his head in confusion. "Project 011? Who is that? The only person I know with a name even remotely similar is exactly that. A person. An amazing, kind girl who means very much to the love of my life's brother. She's the sister of the boy I love goddamnit. The soon to be step sister of the girl I love. Not a 'project'. Not a science experiment. A real human being with real human feelings." The older man sighs in exasperation. "Whatever you want to call her, my offer is still the same." The young man looks around the room for a while, considering the offer. Then, very slowly, he leans towards Brenner. It looks as though he's convinced him, until Steve spits over his cheek. "Go to hell." He whispers, his voice a disgusted snarl. Brenner stands up and opens the door, letting in a scientist. "Very well, Mr Harrington. I had such high hopes for you. Clearly, I was kidding myself." With a wave of his hand, he exits the room, and the scientist jabs him in the neck with a needle. For a moment, nothing happens. Suddenly, Steve's head rolls forward, and his body starts convulsing, some sort of lifeless seizure, until eventually he stops moving altogether. No rise of the chest, no twitch of a finger. Nothing. He's gone.

As the video ended, Nancy ran to Joyce's bedroom in tears and locked the door, Jonathan running after her and eventually convincing her to let him in. They hugged each other and sobbed, grieving for the boy they both loved. El sat in utter silence, whimpers fighting in vain to escape her throat and making her body shake. Hopper wrapped an arm around his daughter, and Mike held her hand softly before she leaned into him and let out a heart wrenching cry. He whispered words of comfort to her, ignoring the stinging tears behind his own eyes. It pained him physically to see her like this, vulnerable and suffering. And he couldn't do a damn thing.

"It's my fault." They were the first words she said after watching the video, quiet and timid at 2am. "What?" she spoke a little louder this time, her tone concrete. "Steve. It's my fault. He died because he tried to keep me safe. If he had agreed- "

"No." Mike was quick to stop her, his voice firm. "I've told you once,

and I'll tell you again. None of this is your fault. I know you say you understand, but you don't, okay? You don't get it. Steve did what he did to save you. And I know for a fact that if you gave him the choice again, he wouldn't do a damn thing different. He cared about you. We all care about you. There's so many people who care about you, El. We would all do everything we could to keep you safe. Just because you're the one with the powers, doesn't mean we aren't allowed to protect you. You act like you're so alone in the world, like it's your job to save everyone. Like you can conquer the world. But you can't El. You can't, and you know it, and I know it, and that terrifies me. Because even though you know, you try anyway. I'm so terrified of losing you, El. You act like you're so alone out there, but you're not. You're not alone. You'll always have me, and the guys, and your mom and dad, and Nance, and Jonathan, and even my mom. We all care about you so goddamn much. You just need to let us." He wanted to say more, but his throat felt dry and he didn't know if there was anything left to say anyway. "I- I'm sorry." He wrapped his arms around her small, shaking body and pulled her closer, kissing her forehead. "You've got nothing to apologise for. This isn't your fault."

9. To Die Would Be An Awfully Big Adventure

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PERSON (ps sorry about the glitch earlier. And sorry for what is
about to happen)

Little by little, things started to get better. Brenner began to become sloppier, and pretty soon they had a few dozen sitting of him at health centres in and around Missouri. He was getting older, and his heart was failing him. Hopper developed friends in higher places, and he managed to collect some information about Brenner's project, albeit very little.

As their leads increased and grew stronger, so did El's spirits. She became more talkative again, and even ate eggos again; something she hadn't done in 3 years. Seeing her happy once more warmed Mike's heart, and dragged him out from a deep pit depression which he'd been suffering alone with ever since November 13th, 1995. They were becoming stronger. They were gaining hope.

"I know where he's gonna be!" El cried, bursting into the kitchen with a heap a papers in her hand, waving them about frantically. "What?" Mike said, jumping up from his seat at the counter and effectively spilling coffee everywhere. Not that either of them noticed. "Brenner! Hopper showed me some of his leads, and a few of the names looked familiar. They were the people he was working with, Mike! I did a little more digging into them. They all've met up with Brenner a few times in the past couple of months. And guess what? They've all conveniently booked into the same hotel in Missouri! Sure, they

aren't all in and out on the same days, but they're not stupid." Mike tried to keep a calm face as he poured a glass of water, took El by the shoulders, sat her down and handed the drink to her. She was bright red and flustered. But it was as a hard feat. This was the most information they'd got, ever! "When's he gonna be there?"

"...December 19th."

Mike froze, memories flashing back to him. December 19th. 6 days before Christmas. The day of the Thessalhydra attack and his abduction and... Steve. Since they'd found out what happened to Steve. Pushing these memories aside, he turned to El. "Then we better starting packing. We've got a plane to catch."

The flight to Missouri was uneventful as one could get, a stark contrast to what would happen in a couple of days. El was still a little wary of being in the air, just as she had been the first (and until that day, last) time she'd been on a plane. Mike found this hilarious. Here was a girl with extraordinary- and to some, terrifying- powers, scared of something as simple as flying. Dustin had exclaimed all those years ago that a superhero with her powers wouldn't be scared of it, and Mike'd stopped himself from slapping him there on the spot. Because she wasn't a superhero. Sure, she had superpowers, and yes, she had been a hero more than a few times, but she wasn't a superhero. She was just a girl with a fucked up past, the girl he'd fallen hopelessly in love with at the age of 12, a girl who just needed to be taught the ways of the world. His El.

If one was to pass by Hotel Phillips, they wouldn't suspect anything out of the ordinary. In fact, if you went past room 401 on the fourth floor, nothing would seem strange at all. However, upon entering the room, things would start to seem stranger [;)]. Papers, newspaper clipping, photographs, evidence collected from all over the globe was scattered across the room and pinned onto the walls. Radios and bats and guns are stashed into drawers and under the mattress. The occupants of the room are planning to confront the man who stole their child, both having faced an inter dimensional monster as a child. Indeed, room 401 of Hotel Phillips is far from normal.

From their spot across the street for the hotel lobby, El would jump every time she saw a man with white hair, only to wilt a little after

realising that, no, it wasn't him. They'd been parked there since 3am, and it was now coming on 6am. Needless to say, she was coming abit restless. So when she did see the right msn, her (thankfully cold) coffee went flying over Mike, startling him awake. Brenner walked the short distance from the lobby to the black car waiting for him, hand in hand with a boy of about 6. El's breath caught, a small whisper escaping her lips. "Benny...". It would've been so easy to kill Brenner right there. A small twitch of her neck, and the bastard would be dead. But she couldn't. Not there. Not in public. And not with Benny there to see it. She didn't want him to witness the death of his father-figure, no matter how much of a manipulating sociopath he was. So she just sat and watched, foot on the ignition and hand gripping the wheel, as her son was drove away yet again.

8am in the morning, El and Mike found themselves sat on a park bench outside of the One Kansas City Place, as Brenner entered with Benny by his side. El stood, and, without being seen, began to walk inside the building. Mike followed minutes later.

"Now 12, wait right here." Brenner said to the boy, his voice cool against the tile walls. "I'll be right back."

"Yes Papa." Replied 12, as Papa left the room, the metal door locking behind him. It was silent in the room, save for the slight humming from the AC. Well, it was, until the locks in the door. The metal swung open, revealing a young woman with a slight trickle of blood coming from her left nostril. She slowly came towards 12, and he backed up in fear. "H-h-who a-are you?"

"I'm your mother, Benny."

12 stood in shock. He'd always wondered about his mother (the people in the fairytales usually had Papas and Mamas), but decided not to bring it up to Papa. It seemed like one of the things he would get mad about. "My name isn't B-Benny. It's t-t-t-twelve." He pulled his shirt sleeve up, revealing a 012 tattoo on his forearm. The woman nodded, kneeling down in front of him, wiping tears from her eyes and showing him her own tattoo. "011...".

She smiled. "Yeah, 11. That was what your Papa called me when I was a child. He was my Papa too. But he isn't good, 12. He took you

away from me when you were just a baby." Now 12 was intrigued. "Did he... take you? Too?" Again, she nodded. "Except no one knew I'd been taken. We've all been searching for you." She quickly grasped his hand. "We have to go now, 12. You can trust me, I promise."

"What is... promise?" The woman – his mother, smiled. "A promise is something you can't break. Ever." 12 thought for a moment, then quickly nodded. Knowing that he had a real family, that Papa was indeed bad, filled him with a certain warmth, which amplified as the woman took his hand. It was as if he felt he finally belonged.

As they walked through corridor after corridor, his mother told 12 of what was to happen. "I'm going to take you to a man named Mike. He's your father. Don't worry, you can trust him. Mike is so, so good. He found me when I ran away from Papa. He gave me happiness and warmth and a home. We're going to give you those things, too. Mike will be with some other people. There'll be... Hopper. He's my dad. Your grandfather. He might look a little scary, but he's good too. Then Jonathan and Nancy might be there. Jonathan is my big brother, and Nancy is Mike's big sister, but she was always like my sister, too. I'll have to go for a little while, there's something I need to do. But Mike and the others will make sure you're safe." By now they reached the lobby, and the woman quickly walked over to a man. "Mike!" The man saw her and rushed towards her, wrapping her in a hug, before looking towards 12. It was like that for a moment, before 12 spoke. "...Dad?" With that, Mike knelt down and hugged 12. At first he flinched at the contact, but after a moment he hugged back, liking the warmth he was wrapped in. His mother had been right about that. Mike was full of warmth and so, so good.

When they finally pulled apart, El bent down and hugged Benny too, placing a kiss on his forehead. "I love you, Benny." she whispered. It sounded like a goodbye. "I love you too, mommy." She then stood up and looked to Mike. "...El?"

"I have to get him, Mike."

Tears started pouring down Mike's cheeks. "No you don't! We have Benny back! Please." His voice was desperate now. "Please don't leave me again." El wrapped her arms around his neck, her own tears falling into his shoulder. "This won't be the last time you see me. I

promise." Mike nodded reluctantly.

"Okay." With that, El turned and walked back towards the corridor. Mike threw one last glance to her, before taking Benny's hand and going outside where Hopper, Jonathan and Nancy were waiting.

"Brenner." A slick, cold voice bounced from the metal walls, and Martin turned towards the body from which it came from. "Subject Eleven, so nice of you to stop by."

Eleven telekinetically threw him against the wall with a great force. So great, in fact, that the walls started trembling, and cracks grew against the roof. The building was going to fall. Quickly, she used her powers to hold the walls together as outside, people began to evacuate. "Now now, Eleven. Look what you've done." She pinned him against the wall this time, straining herself as she struggled to do both tasks. "You can't kill me and keep this building together. You know it. So how about you just let me go? Because if this building collapses, you'll be killing the both of us." El smirked, memories flooding her head, and reality dawned on his face. "To die," she whispered "would be an awfully big adventure."

"ELEVEN NO!" Mike screamed, struggling against Hopper's firm grip as the tower crumbled to the floor. It was all too familiar. It was like events were repeating themselves from 18 years earlier. Eventually, the chunks of concrete stopped falling and the dust settled. Mike broke free of Jim's grasp and sprinted off, searching through the rubble and debris. "EL?EL? ELEVEN WHERE ARE YOU?" He saw brown hair against a slab of rock, and immediately scrambled over. "EL? EL!"

"Mike...". He wiped tears from his eyes and clasped her hand tight.

"Don't worry El. This'll all be over soon. We're gonna get you out of here. You're gonna be okay." She shook her head, tears streaming down her face and mixing with the blood pouring from her nose. She placed a hand over her midsection, wincing in pain, and Mike finally forced himself to finally look. A large piece of metal framing pierced through her stomach, blood rolling like a stream from the wound. They both knew; she wasn't going to get out of this. "Hey Mike?"

He sniffled. "Yeah El?"

"Sing for me?" He almost laughed. She'd always been the better singer of the pair, a song accompanying her almost wherever she was. The prospect of him singing would normally be absurd. But now. Now was different. He thought for a moment, before beginning to sing.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine."

El smiled up at Mike, studying his freckles like they were constellations in the night sky. It wasn't the first time, but she wanted to cherish her last.

"You make me happy when skies are grey."

Sighing, she closed her eyes, smiling, and let herself succumb to the dark, never ending sleep.

"You'll never know dear, how much I love you."

Mike bent his head over her lifeless body and placed a kiss on her forehead, his own tears falling onto her skin.

"Please don't take, my sunshine, away."

THE END